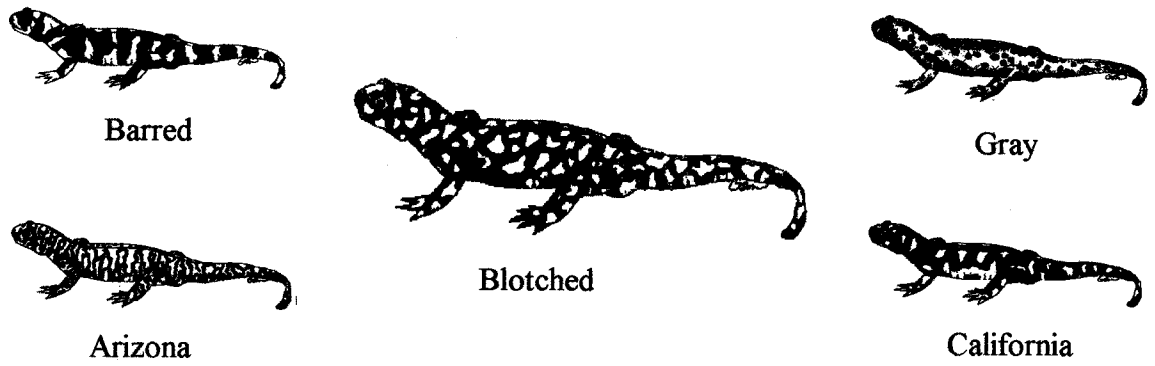
Tiger Salamander

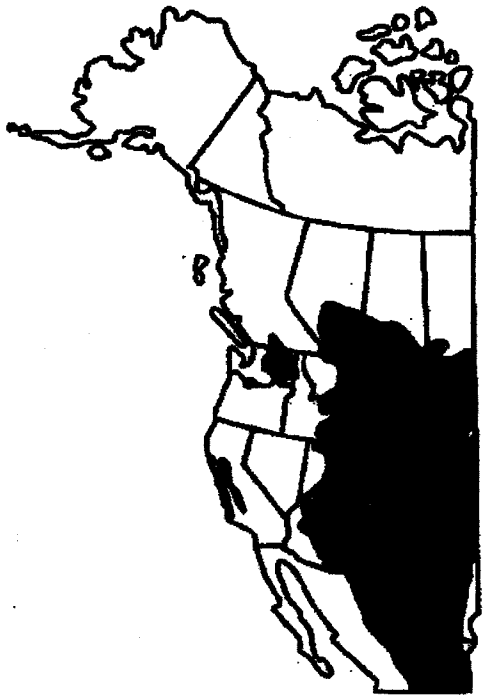
Ambystoma trigrinum
Family Ambystomatidae



Global Rank: G5
State Rank: S3 (WA); S3S4 (WY); S5 (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, UT); SE (NV); SU (OR); S? (CA)

Distribution: Found throughout parts of North America from southern Canada to Mexico. In the West, they are absent from most of the Great Basin, most of Pacific Coast, Mohave and Colorado Deserts. They have been introduced in many locations west of the Rocky Mountains. Tiger salamanders have been found from near sea level to around 12,000 ft. (3,660 m.) in the Rocky Mountains.

Description: There are at least five subspecies of tiger salamanders in the West, differing mainly by color patterns (shown in drawings), and classification has been further confused through introductions using different population sources. Adults reach up to 12 in. (30 cm.) in total length. Key characteristics include a variable body color pattern, but the background color is usually dark green to black, with blotches of yellow, tan, or green. The body is large and cylindrical with about 13



Current range of the tiger salamanders

costal grooves on each side. The tail is about half the length of the body, and the skin is moist and scaleless. Larvae may exceed 9 in. (22 cm.) in total length, and are identified by long, feathery external gills; 14 to 24 gill rakers; and uniform dorsal coloration.

Reproduction: During breeding activities in the spring, the salamanders swarm in the ponds. Being without external gills, they can be seen coming to the water surface to breathe. During courtship, the males deposit a spermophore, or small tent-shaped structure containing sperm, on the bottom of the habitat or attached to bottom debris. Females pick up a spermatophore in the lips of her cloaca and fertilize eggs either before or as they are laid. Tiger salamanders lay up to 1,000 eggs, singly or in small clusters, on submerged vegetation. Clusters are usually linearly arranged and attached to objects. Larvae metamorphose in the first or second summer.

Food: Adult tiger salamanders eat any small animal that can be captured and swallowed. Larvae eat aquatic invertebrates and small vertebrates (especially amphibian larvae) as available. Larger larvae may become cannibals.

Habits: Found in virtually any habitat, providing there is a nearby body of water suitable for breeding. Activity is often associated with rainfall, especially from mid-March through September, and tiger salamanders become inactive in winter in colder climates. Terrestrial adults are usually underground in self-made burrows, or in those made by rodents or other animals. They are most conspicuous when adults move to the breeding areas in April and May and again in September when larvae transform and leave the water to find suitable winter homes. In some years, drying of breeding ponds may result in total reproductive failure.

Management Implications: Extensive use of tiger salamander larvae as fish bait and expanded irrigation in arid lands has resulted in introductions of this species outside its natural range and in the mixing of natural populations, especially in the Southwestern United States.

Important References: Stebbins, R.C. 1985. A field guide to western reptiles and amphibians. The Peterson Field Guide Series, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY; Baxter, G.T., and M.D. Stone. 1980. Amphibians and reptiles of Wyoming. Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Cheyenne, WY; Groves, C.R., B. Butterfield, A. Lippincott, B. Csuti, and J.M. Scott. 1997. Atlas of Idaho's wildlife. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Boise, ID.